

How a city united to save the Fox Theatre 50 years ago

If not for a grassroots uprising, the Peachtree Street landmark might be a parking lot today.

By Rodney Ho

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The early 1970s were a difficult time for Midtown Atlanta as residents were fleeing to the suburbs. The deteriorating Fox Theatre was no longer a go-to place for movies. In 1974, owner Mosque Inc. was in talks to sell the land to Southern Bell, which planned to tear the building down for an office tower and parking lot.

But even in a city known for looking forward more than backward, razing this stellar Moorish architectural gem built in 1929 was a step too far.

“Native Atlantans were watching downtown Atlanta being dismantled,” said Leigh Burns, vice president of community partnerships for the Fox. “This became a line in the sand.”

A grassroots Save the Fox campaign quickly formed. A public hearing at the Fox conducted at the theater by the Georgia Senate Tourism Committee drew 2,500



The Fox Theatre in 1975 (left) when the “Save the Fox” campaign was in full swing; and the theater this month — with more tree foliage across the street and a digital screen — but otherwise looking very much the same. RODNEY HO/AJC/FILE

concerned citizens. Organist Bob Van Camp played music on the Mighty Mo, the 3,622-pipe Möller Deluxe theater organ inside the Fox. Dressed in a dapper white suit, caretaker Joe Patten, who lived in an apartment in the Fox for decades until his death in 2016 and was known as “the Phantom of the Fox,” touted the magic of

Fox continued on **E8**

